

Awakening the Self: Female Consciousness and Religious Oppression in Purple Hibiscus by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

A. Joyce Rebecca

Abstract--- *Gender inequality has remained one of the major social issues represented in contemporary African literature. Women are often subjected to silence, oppression, domestic violence, and patriarchal domination within both family and society. Contemporary women writers therefore use literature as a medium to question these unequal power structures and to represent female identity, resistance, and liberation. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, one of the most significant contemporary African writers, explores these issues deeply in her novel Purple Hibiscus. The novel portrays the experiences of women living under patriarchal authority and examines how female consciousness develops through suffering, education, and self-realization. Through characters such as Kambili, Beatrice, and Auntie Ifeoma, the narrative presents different responses to male domination and social expectations. The study focuses on the themes of gender equality, female identity, silence, resistance, and empowerment in the novel. It further analyses how women challenge oppressive structures and gradually develop the courage to reclaim their individuality and freedom. The novel ultimately highlights the importance of equality, emotional independence, and female agency in both family and society.*

Keywords--- *Gender Equality, Female Consciousness, Patriarchy, Identity, Resistance, Empowerment.*

I. INTRODUCTION

THE literary art involves the creative use of language as an artistic vehicle for conveying various ideas, feelings, and expressions. These include works of poetry, plays, novels, short stories, non-fictional books, and so forth, where style is a key element. As an art form, literature has a beauty and meaning because it involves the use of the imagination, rhythms, imagery, and structuring elements. An important role of literature is the depiction of human life and society. The themes include issues about love, strife, personal identity, justice, freedom, and much more. Readers may experience other cultures, different eras, and even learn of other societies and their realities through characters, plots, and settings. The role of literature is the preservation of culture and history. Myths, folktales, epics, and even religious literature preserve the values, beliefs, traditions, and even languages of the community throughout time. Modern literature provides insights into

current topics, including technology, migration, environmental concerns, and many other issues, allowing future generations to get into the mind of people of past eras.

African literature can be described as the collection of literary works that were created by Africans in different parts of Africa as well as their descendants who live outside the continent. The genre covers the oral tradition of the ancient African culture in which the African people narrated the stories of their ancestors through various forms of oral literature, such as folktales, proverbs, praise songs, myths, and epic songs. African literature is mostly influenced by the oral literature because the oral form creates the rhythmic nature of the written literature.

This approach taken by Adichie in her novel Purple Hibiscus may be viewed in terms of a combination of techniques, style, and theme that work in concert to produce a particular effect on the reader (Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi.,2024; Ezenwa, & Asika, 2025). The narrative in the story is written from a first-person limited perspective, with Kambili Achike as the young narrator of the story (Nahida Lindecrantz,2022). In this way, the reader experiences events such as domestic abuse, religious corruption, and political violence within postcolonial Nigeria vicariously through the developing mind of Kambili.

The use of an episodic plot technique, where the narration starts right at the middle of the crisis but travels back in time by using flashbacks, helps explain the circumstances that caused the collapse of the family structure. So, the episodic technique reinforces the Bildungsroman nature of the novel, as remembering or reflecting on the events of one's past plays an important role in the narrative technique used in this story. The uses of lyrical language with rich imagery along with symbols like the purple hibiscus, the figurines, and silence becomes an effective way of communicating the hidden meanings related to themes such as freedom, identity, and oppression (Fazakas, 2025).

Purple Hibiscus by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, has a wide range of scope, covering many aspects of literary, cultural, and social significance (Fischer, 2016; Nwokocha, 2019). Firstly, one of the scopes of study related to this novel is the discussion of postcolonial Nigeria and its influence on religious affairs, political events, and family issues. The scope can be focused on how the dynamics of monarchy and military rule in the country

A. Joyce Rebecca, Post Graduate Student, Department of English, Dr. MGR Educational and Research Institute University, Chennai, India.

DOI: 10.9756/IJRAS/V12I1/BIJ26007

Received: March 17, 2026; Revised: April 24, 2026; Accepted: May 06, 2026; Published: June 10, 2026

affect the individuals' minds and their family connections, which can be seen through the Achike household.

The book will also make for an interesting subject for stylistic and narratological criticism, such as first-person narrative point of view, flashbacks, and symbolism through the purple hibiscus, model, and the concept of silence. Scholars may look into how the book constructs the development process of the Bildungsroman, in which Kambili matures from a state of innocence to awareness of herself. More so, the scope of the discussion includes religious and ideological criticism, contrasting the fanaticism of Eugene's Catholic faith against the open-mindedness of Auntie Ifeoma's faith. All things considered, it is clear that "Purple Hibiscus" will continue to be a rich source material for postcolonialist, feminist, narratological, and African literary critics (GradeSaver, 2025).

"The old silence had broken and left us with the sharp pieces" (Adichie 257).

The "old silence" is the oppressive, rigid atmosphere in the Achike home. When it breaks, it does not bring peace at once but painful change and conflict. The "sharp pieces" suggest that freedom and truth are painful to face after long suppression.

II. OPPRESSION AND THE STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM

One of the important themes of *Purple Hibiscus* is the separation between oppression and the desire to gain one's freedom. This story takes place in an upper-class family who enjoys a rich lifestyle after their country becomes independent from colonialism. Though the wealth cannot compensate for the oppression and imprisonment that members of this family feel psychologically. Eugene Achike makes sure that every member of his family feels controlled, both physically and spiritually stable. He puts strict rules, practices violence, and keeps an eye on each child and spouse. Eugene's idea of perfection involves not making any mistake at school, having perfect manners, and practicing his strict style of European Catholicism. Kambili, the teenager who narrates the story, lives in fear of committing even minor mistakes and facing humiliation for these faults.

The freedom here does not just revolve around the issue of traveling. But, this freedom center to the liberty of thinking, feeling, and speaking without restriction. The title of the book itself reflects this theme because it talks about the "purple hibiscus," which is not common and unusual, and which cannot grow in the "normal" world of the Achike family. When they come to Nsukka, the place where Auntie Ifeoma stays, there is a change in how they live, as they now laugh, discuss and disagree freely. They make friends and classmates with common people, they voice out their opinions, and they see how people disagree passionately, and not in fear. After seeing this, they slowly start to doubt their father's teachings on religion.

The hibiscus flower found in Ifeoma's garden represents the new freedom that they have discovered in being flawed, asking questions and defining themselves. This is a difficult process, however, as it involves suffering, making moral decisions, and experiencing the sad results of Papa's oppression. As such, the novel depicts the discovery of freedom as one which has been difficult, delicate and bound by grief (Benakli, & Messadi, 2022).

"We spoke more with our spirits than with our lips"
(Adichie 16).

This quote is indicative of the fear and silence in the Achike household. Papa's domineering rule creates an atmosphere where no one feels free to express themselves; this is the impact of oppression on relationships.

III. FAMILY, SILENCE, AND VIOLENCE

A further thematic aspect present in this novel is that of the love-hate relationship that exists within the framework of a family. The Achikes, despite being an apparently perfect family, lead lives that are not at all what the outside world feel them to be. Eugene is a wealthy Catholic who is highly respected for his status, his son, Jaja, is a perfect student, and his wife, Beatrice, is an elegant woman who behaves herself perfectly well. In public, they are considered an ideal Christian family. However, in their own private domain, they lead completely contrasting lives. Eugene's religious emotion results in him physically beating up, emotionally dominating, and strictly disciplining everyone in the house. A small mistake, such as not studying well in studies, behaving incorrectly in speaking and laughing, leads to physical or emotional throbs or even punishments.

The use of silence is very important in this intense cycle. In Achike house, silence is not serene, it holds terror and silent pain within it. Silence in Nsukka, on the other hand, could mean reflection and warmth in most cases rather than terror. For example, in Nsukka, Kambili slowly learns to differentiate between productive silence that opens room for thinking and destructive silence that hides pain from others. There are two types of family life shown in the novel; Eugene's and Ifeoma's households. Eugene's home resembles that of a colonialist who uses violence, intimidation, and terror against his family. On the other hand, in Ifeoma's house, people openly speak about their opinions and show their love to each other in humorous conversations. This novel shows how domestic violence and oppression may occur in upper classes and religious families (Wardhana, 2025). The writer emphasizes the importance of speaking the truth to break the silence and start healing after suffering years of oppression.

"The silence hung over the table like the blue-black clouds in the middle of the rainy season" (Adichie, Chapter 2).

Silence is compared to the dark storm clouds because it portrays the underlying fears within the family members. Silence does not bring peace to them but instead brings danger and violence.

IV. RELIGION, COLONIALISM, AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

The novel *Purple Hibiscus* also looks into the impact of religion and colonial history on personal and national identities in Nigeria. Eugene Achike is a devoted Catholic who embraces an outlook formed during the colonial period where Western Christianity was seen as the embodiment of morality while the practices of Africans were considered backward and sinful. He has abandoned his Igbo identity, refuses to speak Igbo in Church, and even scolds his father, Papa-Nnukwu, for engaging

in “paganistic” practices. According to Eugene, one can only practice his true religion in a European way, and any association with Igbo culture is considered contamination.

In contrast, Papa-Nnukwu and Aunty Ifeoma represent a more flexible and balanced relationship between religion and culture. They do not see Christianity and Igbo tradition as mutually exclusive; instead, they blend prayers, rituals, and beliefs from both worlds. This shows the possibility of a hybrid identity that is neither fully Western nor purely “traditional.” Kambili’s exposure to this alternative way of life helps her question the binary thinking imposed by her father. The purple hibiscus once again becomes a powerful symbol, it is a flower created by mixing different colours, just as Nigerian identity must blend African heritage and colonial influence into something new and authentic. Through this theme, Adichie critiques both religious fanaticism and the internalised colonial mindset, arguing that true selfhood and freedom come from embracing a complex, loving, and self-aware cultural identity rather than from imitating the coloniser or rejecting one’s own roots.

The character of Eugene Achike holds the idea that he should follow Western-style Catholicism, and he rejects everything related to his native Igbo culture, deeming all of its aspects as sinful and backward. He is against speaking Igbo in the church and despising his father for his attitude toward African religion, revealing the extent to which colonialism impacted him. Papa-Nnukwu and Aunty Ifeoma represent a different attitude toward religion and native culture since they believe in both Christianity and their traditions.

“Being defiant can be a good thing sometimes” (Adichie, Chapter 11).

This quotation reflects Kambili’s growing awareness that questioning authority including religious authority can lead to self-discovery and freedom. It marks her movement away from blind obedience.

V. CONCLUSION

Purple Hibiscus’ ending is heartwarming but hopeful, combining all the novel’s central motifs of violence, family, silence, and gradual freedom from oppression. Following the Palm Sunday incident, the tenuous peace in the Achike household is shattered altogether. Eugene’s reign of terror is at an end, and in her desperation, his wife, Beatrice, decides to poison him in order to stop his tyranny once and for all. After Papa’s unexpected death, Kambili and Jaja are shocked by his death, and the subsequent postmortem shows that Papa had been poisoned. To their shock, Beatrice admits that she is responsible for poisoning her husband after enduring his reign of terror for years. In order to save his family members, Jaja openly admits his crime of poisoning Papa, and he is sentenced to jail.

In the final chapter, the novel jumps ahead in time almost three years after the death of Papa. Now Kambili is eighteen, no longer the shy girl she used to be. She has grown into a young woman who is more self-confident, reflective, and mature emotionally. Mama is older, having aged from all the sorrow, guilt, and the beatings of her years. Aunty Ifeoma, representing

a different world, one where laughter was plentiful, has relocated to America with her kids after losing her job at the university, thus representing the closure of that nurturing and safe haven of Nsukka. But still, Kambili carries on that world within her and herself in her transformation. Finally, the novel closes as Kambili and Mama visit their brother, Jaja, in prison. Despite his experience in jail, Jaja is toughened up but not tamed; his physical body bears the marks of his imprisonment. His lawyers are optimistic that he will be out of jail soon, and there is hope for a new era in the country due to the change in the military government to democracy.

In this last part, however, hope is not expressed through an assertion of triumph, but rather through a fragile possibility of freedom. Through the imagination of her future, Kambili pictures herself and Jaja traveling, planting oranges, and watching purple hibiscuses blooming, suggesting freedom and beauty as well as the ability to go back home. At the end of Purple Hibiscus, hope cannot overcome the tragedy of abuse, pain, and silence; however, it can be suggested through the thought that despite having gone through terrible experiences, people may heal, speak up, and reconstruct their lives.

REFERENCES

- [1] Nahida Lindecrantz, N. (2022). Kambili’s Journey to Dignity, and Self-empowerment: A Womanist Approach to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus.
- [2] Fischer, P. (2016). The Wish for Stability: From Alienation to Femininity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus.
- [3] Nwokocha, S. (2019). Subversive Responses to Oppression in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 54(3), 367-383.
- [4] Elizabeth, I. C., Zainal, Z. I., & Singh, H. K. J. (2025). Intersectional Female Oppression in Chimamanda Adichie Purple Hibiscus. *Quantum Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 6(2), 416-430.
- [5] Ezenwa, C., & Asika, I. (2025). Religious Hypocrisy and the Psychology of Oppression in Chimamanda Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus. *Ansu Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 5(1).
- [6] Fazakas, E. (2025). The Weight of Faith: Religious Symbols and Rituals as Tools of Oppression in Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus. *Buletinul Stiintific al Universitatii Politehnica din Timisoara, Seria Limbi Moderne*, (24), 87-94.
- [7] Benakli, K., & Messadi, Y. (2022). *Domestic Violence and Trauma in Alice Walker’s The Color Purple (1983) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus (2003)* (Doctoral dissertation, Mouloud Mammeri University of Tizi-Ouzou).
- [8] Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. Purple Hibiscus. Anchor Books, 2003. SparkNotes. “Purple Hibiscus: Full Book Summary.” SparkNotes, 2024.
- [9] GradeSaver. “Purple Hibiscus Summary.” GradeSaver Study Guide, 2025.
- [10] Wardhana, S. B. K. (2025). Subalternity and Resistance: Examining Women’s Experiences in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus. *Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa*, 15(3), 234-242.